



SITUATION TRAINING: Key to training in a Game-based Approach

This article uses excerpts from Wayne Elderton's manual: "Situation Training: Drilling for the Game-based approach". This article also appeared in the International Tennis Federation "Coaching and Sports Science Review" (Issue 44, April 2008). This manual is available along with other coaching resources at www.acecoach.com.

As coaching moves away from the technical 'stroke model' methodology and towards a Game-based approach (GBA), new coaching tools are needed. In the past, the tools coaches used to plan and structure lessons were the technical stroke models (e.g. the forehand, backhand, serve, etc). Coaches who use a GBA but continue to build lessons and plans around strokes risk being sucked back into model methodology. For a GBA, stroke models make poor planning tools since they ignore tactical elements. Effective GBA training combines tactical and technical learning.

The strength of the GBA lies in the fact that tactics (what to do) is placed before technique (how to do). Tactics include critical elements required for successful game play like decision-making, problem solving, anticipation, etc. A very effective way to keep tennis training on track with a GBA is to use what I like to call "**Situation Training**". Drills are more effective when they are about *situations* rather than strokes.

In learning (whether business, medicine or tennis), the rule is: "**The transfer of learning between any two situations is directly proportionate to the degree they are similar**". In other words, skills will not transfer from lessons or drills if practice does not re-create a realistic game-play environment. This is the pitfall with many basket feeding drills. As a result, some proponents of GBA outright reject basket feeding as a tool coaches should use. However, even basket feeding drills can be used effectively in a GBA if Situation Training is employed.

Whether playing chess or tennis, the foundation of *playing* any game is tactical. Tactics are ways to win the game. They employ the relationships between the player, an opponent(s), and the elements of the game (e.g. a ball, the court, etc). Using situations as building blocks brings together all the elements of tennis (tactics, decision-making, problem-solving, technique, psychology, etc).

For tennis, we can incorporate all these elements by placing them in a situational framework.

POINT SITUATIONS

The Situation Training system starts with the 'big picture' tactical categories. These follow the stages of how a typical tennis point unfolds and are called, "**Point Situations**":

1. INITIATE:

In this stage, the player begins the point off either the serve or return. Does the player gain advantage on their 1st serve more often than not? What about their 2nd serve? On the return, does the player neutralize the opponent's advantage and capitalize on and weaker serves, etc?

2. BUILD:

In this stage a player must maintain consistency but also maneuver their opponent into making an error or giving up the advantage. For example, all too often players try to 'win' from a neutral baseline exchange. Taking too much risk means giving up more points than you get. Not being aggressive enough means the opponent can take advantage.

3. ADVANTAGE:

In this stage the player must identify when they have an advantage and then capitalize on it. For example, this could be an approach shot that sets up a winning volley or an angled topspin that pulls the opponent off the court. The idea is to increase the pressure on the opponent.

4. FINISH:

In this stage the player has the opportunity to outright win the point using for example, an overhead, or a put-away volley. Many players don't practice Finishing since they feel it should be 'easy'. As every experienced player knows, there are no 'easy' balls in tennis, only ones with greater opportunity. It is common to see players set up the point over and over again only to panic and blow the finishing shot.

5. STAY-IN:

This stage is the other side of the coin of both the **Advantage** and **Finish** Stages. Players must learn to defend when an opponent has an advantage or finishing opportunity. Sometimes, all it takes to turn a match around is to successfully defend against a couple of finishing opportunities by an opponent. In addition to defending, this stage also includes countering (turning around an opponent's advantage). When countering, a player isn't playing it as safe as when defending. Countering includes all the passing shots against opponents at net and approaching the net. This stage is most often trained at the same time as the Advantage and Finish stages.

Note: Every point obviously doesn't progress through all of these stages (e.g. a Serve & Volley may go from Initiate to Finish). However, all of them need to be trained to make a complete player.

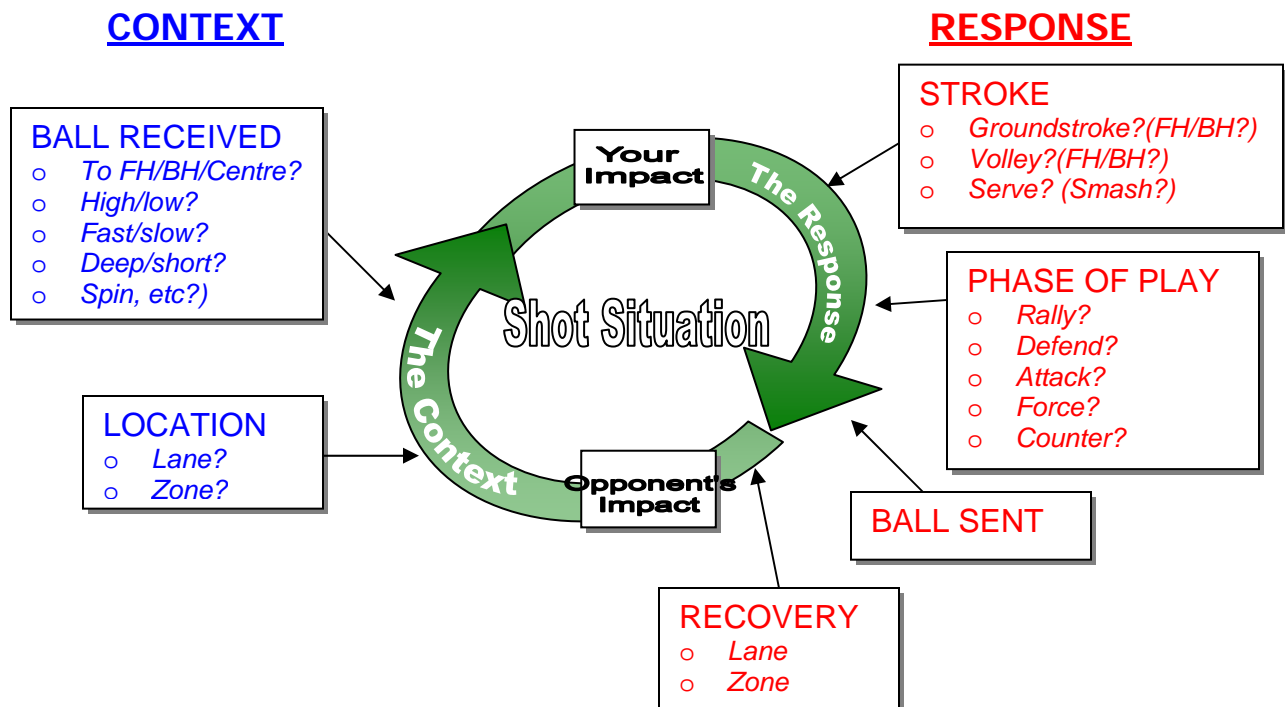
SHOT SITUATIONS

The next element of Situation Training is to define the situation in a more narrow way. For more specific training, coaches can use the **'Shot Situation'** (sometimes called a **"Shot Cycle"**) which describes the cycle of events that happen during a shot from the player's impact to the opponent's, and back again.

This framework gives coaches a critical tool to systematically organize training tactically. It allows lesson construction ("Coach, I would like to work on this situation that happened to me at the tournament"), unit planning ("This month we will cover these situations"), and the creation of drills ("Today's drill will be about maintaining a neutral crosscourt exchange").

The Shot Situation includes two main 'halves'. A tactical **Context** that presents a challenge to the player and a **Response** that deals with the challenge.

- The **Context** incorporates all the elements that happen in the situation when the player receives the ball (where they are in relation to the opponent and the characteristics of the ball received).
- The **Response** includes all the elements required to answer the challenge (the Phase of Play and the characteristics of the ball sent).



Note: For a detailed outline of all the elements of the Shot Situation, see the Acecoach.com article: "The Shot Situation"

SITUATION TRAINING

By using the appropriate *Shot Situation* elements, training becomes ‘game relevant’ and fits into a GBA. For example, a lesson or a drill could start with this introduction to a context (try to picture it on the court with players):

*“In a Both Back situation, the opponent was located **deep** behind their **baseline** and the player was **near** their own **baseline** (Location). The opponent sent a **high** ball with **topspin deep** to the player’s **backhand lane** (Reception Ball Controls). “*

The Shot Situation diagram can also be represented in the following chart form:

CONTEXT		RESPONSE			
Location	Ball Received	Stroke	Phase	Ball Sent	Recovery
Player: Baseline	High ball with topspin to players backhand	Backhand	Rally (neutral)	Slice Deep Crosscourt	Defensive position behind baseline and to the left of centre
Opponent: Deep behind their baseline					
Challenge: Avoid sending a weak ball back to the middle of the opponent’s court		Effect on Opponent: Send a ball that keeps the opponent from gaining advantage (neutral)			

Once the Context has been introduced, the next step is to help the student create a Response. The example on the above chart is a neutral slice crosscourt however, that is only one of a number of possibilities.

The coach can either set up the situation and let the student try to solve it (with guidance) or guide students into selecting a Response before the drill begins and jump right into training it. The student should always be part of creating their own solution. If the student has a sense of solving the problem on their own, they will become better problem-solvers. If the coach gives them solutions, it short-circuits the student’s ability to become a self-sufficient player.

To train the situation, the drill must re-create the context. Feeding becomes critical for repetition (whether basket or live ball feeding from a partner). When the context changes (e.g. the ball received is lower, harder, etc), it gives a great opportunity for decision-making to be incorporated. Technical coaching in this framework becomes relevant and practical and transfers to real match play easier.

It is worth mentioning again that this process is also the basis for creating hundreds of drills. How many situations do your players need to master? Every competition they play will produce a number of situations they need to work on. This is a far more useful way to practice than going through countless general ‘forehand’ & ‘backhand’ drills.

'EVOLVING' DRILLS

By understanding the components of Situation Training, coaches can create new drills or, change elements of the drills they currently use increase their realism. For example, a coach could take a single file line drill with players hitting crosscourt forehands and evolve the following elements:

- The position of the feeder (re-create the opponent's location) and the characteristics of the ball fed to recreate a specific context
- The starting location of the hitter and their recovery after the shot (start in a realistic position based on 'the shot before' the one being trained)
- Determine the key decisions required in the situation
- Determine the appropriate Phase of Play for the hitter (neutral? Forcing? Etc.)
- Measure the characteristics of the ball sent required to successfully perform the tactic (did the ball have sufficient direction, distance, speed and spin to be effective?)
- Position opponent's to re-create a competitive environment (after the feed, have an opponent ready to continue the point)

These are just some of the changes that would make the drill practical and more transferable to match play.

CONCLUSION

By using a tactical based Situation Training framework that moves from general **Point Situations** to more specific **Shot Situations**, coaches can ensure their training and planning harmonizes with the Game-based approach. More importantly, they will be more effective at helping students learn to play better tennis.

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